

Walking Home

Poems Along the Way

POEMS ALONG THE WAY

Mary Ann Moran

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Master of Liberal Studies
in the Division of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Indiana University


May 1997

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Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University at South
Bend in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Liberal
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(Project Advisor)

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Gabrielle Robinson, Ph.D.
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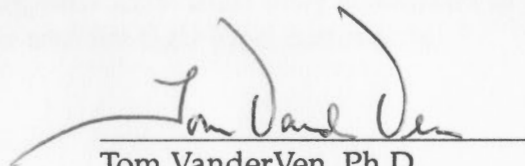

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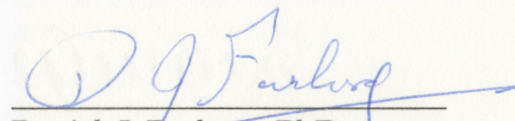
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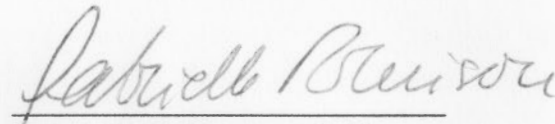
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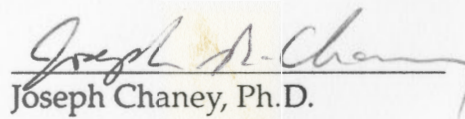
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For Laura

Special thanks to Tom VanderVen for his guidance and encouragement along the way; to Gabrielle Robinson and Joe Chaney for taking time from their busy schedules to be on the Committee and for their kind comments.

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"All my life I have been trying to learn to read,
to see and hear, and to write." — Carl Sandburg

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But how to become the conjurer of words myself, how grow to be a poet — that is the maze in which I lose myself. For over 40 years I have been putting on paper my responses to life. The earliest attempts were trite mixtures of rhyme and sentiment with the hope of making instant poems. Throughout high school, college, and the early years of motherhood, my writing was sporadic, swelled and ebbed with the seasons of my life, depended exclusively on "inspiration" as I disclaimed the necessities of revision and rewriting. Sometimes, two or three years would go by and I would have added nothing to the poetry notebooks I kept.

When I began course work for the Master of Liberal Studies degree, I began to think about poetry in a more serious way. Among the pieces I had kept over the years, there were a few I still liked, a few images that sounded fresh. In the fall of 1991, I enrolled in the Poetry Writing course and was required to write and to rewrite on a regular basis. The criticism of instructor and classmates was not always easy-to-accept, but it forced re-evaluation and approaching a "finished" piece from a different viewpoint sometimes gave me a new poem which was better than the original.

II

"The writing that you do, that so thrills you,
that so rocks and exhilarates you, as if you
were dancing right next to the band, is
barely audible to anyone else." — Annie Dillard

For whom do I write? For myself as a way to return to a place and time, to a picture of myself at some moment in the past — to see how life was for me then. And to share with someone else — the best stories we heard as children were the

WALKING HOME : POEMS ALONG THE WAY

I

**"All my life I have been trying to learn to read,
to see and hear, and to write." — Carl Sandburg**

When I read poetry, I most enjoy poets who tell me an entire story in a few lines or those who describe places I have experienced myself, whether a medieval European city or the bittersweet memory of a lost love. Because I usually read poetry aloud, the way words fall on my ears is important. Unusual metaphors, almost-rhymes, sensory words that instantly convey to me a physical experience are what I seek in the writing I most admire and enjoy.

But how to become the conjurer of words myself, how grow to be a poet — that is the maze in which I lose myself. For over 40 years I have been putting on paper my responses to life. The earliest attempts were trite mixtures of rhyme and sentiment with the hope of making instant poems. Throughout high school, college, and the early years of motherhood, my writing was sporadic, swelled and ebbed with the seasons of my life, depended exclusively on "inspiration" as I disclaimed the necessities of revision and rewriting. Sometimes, two or three years would go by and I would have added nothing to the poetry notebooks I kept.

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For whom do I write? For myself as a way to return to a place and time, to a picture of myself at some moment in the past — to see how life was for me then. And to share with someone else — the best stories we heard as children were the

ones our parents and grandparents told when we begged "tell about when you were little."

Personal history is distorted by memory, and in telling any story there is danger of confusing what is fact with creative embellishments that make it more tellable. Before my daughter Laura reads me anything she has written, she warns — "Remember, it's not really you and it's not really me." But, of course, it is. Whether she writes about something she did or only wished she had done or puts together an incident from books read or dreams dreamed, the finished product is filled with "Laura," while any "Mother" she creates on paper has some connection with me. If we could only become better interpreters, we might come to know better the other person and ourselves seen through another's creative eye. Writing paves the way, too, for a connection with strangers everywhere who recognize the truth of what one says, who have been there themselves.

III

"But even yet, whenever I see a tall, pale
snowstorm stalking across the field and
bowing at my window, I find I must translate
my feelings into poetry." — Emily Dickinson

Trying to explain the why of my writing, I remember one time when the dragons on the cookie sheet slid out of the oven, fat and full of power. Warm, smelling not of brimstone or sulphur, but of winter afternoons and childhood. What made them more than a sweet bite, what made them alive was the magic of memory, old stories, and something else just out of sight.

Or heading west on I-80, the morning full of promise, anticipation, excitement. Suddenly I'm filled with the certainty that at some point ahead on this very road lies the dividing line between this moment and another time. That it is indeed possible to slip into some other existence as real as this one, to see a horde of dark riders surge over the top of the next dune, to be brought into the pages of a favorite book, one's own past, or some totally new adventure engineered by a twist of time. Imagination? Impressed with the lingering power of words we are not even aware we keep inside us.

Delight, wonder, suspension of belief. Don't look for the strings, the hidden trap door. Float on the varied winds of the seasons within oneself. Ride with dragons or angels or fireflies. Fall into places or reverie or love.

So I try to concentrate on each moment — to discover with what it is filled, with what it is filling me. I attempt to see and hear the world around me, to translate my feelings into poetry, to make audible to someone else what exhilarates and

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sets me dancing, or what isolates me, freezes me as in a game of Statues.

Mark Rothko, an abstract expressionist, painted large soft-edged rectangular shapes, using different combinations of color to vary the mood of his paintings. He wanted the beholder to become absorbed in his paintings. This is what well-written poetry can do for the one who experiences it. Poets provide the shape, the color, and let the beholder enter into the poem each in his own way.

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These poems were written over the past five years. I cannot isolate any one prevailing theme in my work. Any day something new may stir the desire to create. The result is a collection of emotional responses which I have divided into three sections.

"Blue Moods and Love Songs" contains poems centered around love — love found, love lost, love never actualized but kept for musings on a rainy day. Over the years I wrote a number of poems which celebrate children, some written from memoirs of my own childhood, a few in a child's voice. These are gathered under "A Fragile Delight." Carl Sandburg refers to the sources of creativity as "This Borderland of Dream and Logic." The poems found in this section were inspired by people, places, and those flashes into some past or future one is almost able to grasp.

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FIRST LOVE POEM

Listen, Mama
he holds me
whose lyrics he wants to remember
memorizes my bones
how they come together
at the hollow of my throat
and at my wrists ah—
his wrists are beautiful
his long-fingered hands
safety nets to catch me
when I sleep into bad dreams.
When he says my name vibrations
of a thousand sandhill cranes
rising rush through me
and I am winging toward the most
extraordinary daybreak.
Mama, did you ever
look at someone
and forget to breathe?

Blue Moods and Love Songs

♪

FIRST LOVE POEM

Listen, Mama,
he holds me like a song
whose lyrics he wants to remember
memorizes my bones
how they come together
at the hollow of my throat
and at my wrists ah—
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Mama, did you ever
look at someone
and forget to breathe?

it began
a slow idea
as water drips down stained
stone here in this city's learned
solemnity you bump into a friend
on a rainslick street tripped up
by age-old possibilities below gargoyles
their foreign-flavored
humor primed
at your expense and suddenly
you find yourself in scene
after grainy scene
of art-film classics

FALLING IN EUROPE

into picture postcards
dropped from some caring
angel's arms into this
raw November landing
heart-side up

beside Leuven's cathedral
your hands flat against cool flags
rainbow-stained by sudden sun
light through glowering clouds
with a cubit of desire you could
reach to that spire's height
or be crushed under an avalanche
of tumbling rock and memory
unbalanced buttresses collapsed
about your feet

frisson
touch stone brushed by the rough
robe of some cowed scholar, dark-robed
cleric whose footsteps yours overlap
through time

it began
a slow idea
as water drips down stained
stone here in this city's learned
solemnity you bump into a friend
on a rainslick street tripped up
by age-old possibilities below gargoyles
their foreign-flavored
humor primed
at your expense and suddenly
you find yourself in scene
after grainy scene
of art-film classics

DEEP WATER

the hotel window
overlooks a narrow time-cobbled lane
he puts an arm around you to draw
you back to bed later you will rush
into the streets
with wind-borne bells
imprint pictures greedy
to keep all odd tasting words, strangers' faces
you will ring around the town hopscotch
down each newly discovered alleyway
and anyone who sees you now will know
if you stumble
if you fall
it is the unexpected
shove of love
and carefully now
you close your eyes and turn

I have never learned to swim

DEEP WATER LA CHAGALL

wading in words toward a beginning
trading stories in flight tossed
we test the waters of each other
to depths now clear now cool
but beneath the smooth surface
of any easy friendship running
currents stir ripples of alarm

I'm better with letters or poems ink-jetted
dark against stark summer white
self-reflecting pools a thousand miles
of still life in between
swirling conversations confuse
my level-headed self on my toes
suddenly up to my neck in what-ifs
side-slipping on green
water-weeds and I told you

I have never learned to swim

fiddling in smoky blues springy mud
and earth tones your music astounds
the sky notes bounce
from star to pinball star
and shiver the moon into pieces
of moo cow and chicken tenders
you and I profiles suspended
over ladders to the lovers
the village roofpoles
far below

WIND SONG A LA CHAGALL

plastic bag hurtled toward a beginning
again ever after in flight tossed
upon waves of March rising higher
than the top of the parking garage and lost
to my simple sight among gray cloud
and sky space some new time
telling a story

delight of my eyes
and when I saw you
kiting above me
from swoop to dive devil dare
I fluffed my hair to be each
tress caressed in the sun
of your take a chance grin
you toss about sweet speckled candy
rocks animate the very wind
with vocal swings
and pinwheel blends sing
to me oh look

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and earth tones your music astounds
the sky notes bounce
from star to pinball star
and shiver the moon into pieces
of moo cow and chicken tenders
you and I profiles suspended
over ladders to the lovers
the village roofpoles
far below

my hair almost your message
is still there

SECRETS & FLOWERS

grace less than
a Limoges thimble
full saving me

only child of dark
dreamers restless
when the day lights

at 6 am and the car heads
itself any way warming
by minutes hands in your

pockets not to hold mine
you are too careful why
are we so careful

not to stumble
you say a mental
affair less pain less

mess and besides your
wife I tell you to visit Cave
Hill Cemetery for the swans

and next year maybe then you
reach fingers to my hair harp
strings or conduits of secret

codes imagine we laugh
together but leave the party
apart and later when I brush

my hair almost your message
is still there

THESE ARE FLOWERS

if I could win you with words
I would wrap mine in marguerites
sweet alyssum small and subtle
so unaware and almost surprised
you would wake in their fragrance
find blossoms in your pockets clover
chains to remind you summer ties
are not meant to bind friends forever
can fade and leave the memories
that touch like swift silk across bare skin
your finger tips across me your eyes
that drink sometimes my stories
with such approval I want
to refill the glass again and again
while I hold my breath
and check the nightly forecast
for those first frost warnings

BALANCE IS ALL TO THE UNDECIDED

the snowflakes are perfect Stars
of David she says but he doesn't hear
her because the roads are bad

already they are miles too late
for small talk so she grabs the door
handle and thinks about spinning

out of control beyond December
into a flannel blue dawn where a bone
button full moon hangs by a thread

in the west and twinkle lights stop
short of the murly river water caught
in reflection — stop me, too,

she prays on ascending notes of panic
while they drive in velvet isolation

CROSS PURPOSES

As two hawks criss-cross November sky
so do you and I
glaze our conversation
with airy expectation
this lazy gliding in air streams
trailing scent of five and dime dreams

might as well be lowly crows
cawp across dry corn rows
out of sorts and out of time
featherweight frauds of avian rhyme

on roily air we beat black wings
perverse hubristic loath to sing
hold winter's solitary notion
to self-protect curtail all motion

await some other wait for Spring

If I could avoid this swirl
of multiple choice responses,
sweep them aside
like snow dustings on the front walk,

blink them away, eye-floaters, and see clearly
you and which way you are moving
with the evening soft around your shoulders --

The page edge across an old paper cut
leaves a bright blot upon the white
as if I had pricked my finger
on the sharp flourish of your signature.

I never wrote those words for you.

READING BETWEEN TREELINES IN JANUARY

Your words in my hand, cold
to the sweet bone of my fingers' soul.

How the sky blues out and down to sleep,
tree branches startle with fragile tangles,
point and accuse with all the emotions of the indecisive.

My breath clouds the window
as a chaos of grackles rises on a sound,
waves silence from the sky,
specks of dark ash in a maelstrom.

Of their eldritch laughter
shards fall into the river, thin
like brittle candy on waxed paper,
broken with one sharp click.

If I could be a roughhaired bear,
weave winter dreams on little food,
rumble deep in seasonal hiatus —

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BEL CANTO IN A ONE-WAY STREET

I'm a white coyote, Love, snow angels
howling for what I haven't got
while Orion stalks his cold way west.
Hunters and disappointed lovers
make patterns among the stars,
but I wander with this big dipper
of a heart dripping self-pity since you left.
Though I've let them trim my fur
and tie a red bandanna 'round my neck
I ghost-slip away when rough nights call.
Now I lean into the keening wind,
howl to drown the little voice
that cries, *I want, I want,* or Debussy
and wish a musical moon or two
into the way it was with you.

Miranda eats no red meat
and his Polish mother doesn't understand

HARMONY ON A ONE-WAY STREET

Miranda makes beautiful snow angels
in his white satin sheets
she has lost the desire for sex

he found her at the movies
between two Fellini features
doing a line of coke in the back row

she smiled a Madonna promise
so he took her home
sometimes he plays the oboe for her

Scarlatti's "Sento Nel Core" or Debussy
while she dips oranges in sugar and sways
her supple body, eyes half-closed

Miranda eats no red meat
and his Polish mother doesn't understand

A KIND OF LOVE POEM

whelmed by my mother
and daughter
who act for me
manipulate my present tense
a well-matched team
one to play the stops
one to be my voice as if
my presence were no more
than shadow an echo
of their brighter colors
it is a kind of love
what they perceive as weakness
concerns them
and while they arrange my life
I fade a little
here a little
there I float
I dream of an empty amphitheatre
and the sound of wind
blown through me

WALKING HOME

from piano lessons through crunchy snow as boots
invading slash sun goes
stretch of woods on Kessler Mrs. Schmitt's two cookies
for the journey wrapped in a holiday ☿
napkin in my mittened hand one to eat
when I'd passed the woods one at the top of the hill
mesmerized by the unconscious grace of easy snow
flakes falling to melt on a deep blue sleeve
or blinking against a sharp wind which blew
from my mind all memory of major and minor
scales and propelled me homeward to the front porch
where I stopped to inhale the cold newsprint
smell of the paper tossed there by Danny
counter-balancing his newsbag with sharpened skates
for later solitary dashes across the frozen tennis court
dying days froze us into our separate stories
and for a winter's moment we held the pose
despite the pull of figurative home fires
all the stronger when we are young and think
we might slide away to Icelandic explorations
instead I settled inside where supper aromas wrapped
round me as welcome as Mama's quick hug
and Howdy Doody chuckled with Buffalo Bob
from the snowy screen of a black and white tv

WALKING HOME

from piano lessons through crunchy snow or boot-
invading slush sun going down behind the shallow
stretch of woods on Kessler Mrs. Schmidt's two cookies
for the journey wrapped in a holiday
napkin in my mittened hand one to eat
when I'd passed the woods one at the top of the hill
mesmerized by the unconscious grace of easy snow
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GYMNAST

Alison
rung to blue iron rung
spark my delight
when I see you crown
the metal dome beaming
above me face haloed
with wind-fluffed honey
silk rays from swoop to dive
devil dare you slip-swing
that perfect body (so new
not even three years used)
through the tip-top blue
barred space of the jungle
gym in perfect imitation of baby
simian tumbling gymnast feather
girl and drop all
trustingly into my arms

JN SPRJNG

I ride my bike along
the alleys to find lilac
bushes and bring home
bouquets for Mama
who bends her face to the flowers
so her long hair falls into
the purple and she breathes
in the sweetness and smiles at me
and I want to sing her a garden.

Yesterday I saw her
cry I felt small inside so
I made mint tea in her cup
of blue unicorns and took it
to her room but she pushed
my hand away and I dropped
the cup. Today I found the piece
with the littlest one running.

Mama put music without words
on the old record player and we danced
like rain and sky and listened at night
to the lake talk to itself

now these nights when Uncle Jim makes music
with Mama's guitar and Irish Irene is
humming in the bathroom
the up and down buzz of sort-of-a-party
mixes in me with the up and down waves of the lake

till Gary who is very big and told me
he's a Mountain Man laughs loud and someone says
"Hush, Gary, the kid's asleep!"
but I'm not

I rub my thumb on the silky fur of Sam-the-Bear's ear
and turn over soft
and snuggle into
the warm waves of Corey Lake

COREY LAKE

some nights
tucked in with Sam-the-Bear
dreams tugging at my ankles
just before night pulls the shade on day
I hear the front door open
for Mama's friends and sort-of-a-party
the ruffle of voices chinking glass
and laughter mix in my head
with the night sounds of the lake
where we stayed for a week in summer

that week each day was sort-of-a-party
for Mama and me
we squished our toes in the muckyness
watched snapping turtles watching us
caught baby toads and told stories

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I rub my thumb on the silky fur of Sam-the-Bear's ear
and turn over soft
and snuggle into
the warm waves of Corey Lake

MIRANDA'S SUMMER

Miranda lost the cousins
lying on Christmas
under the backyard evergreen

sometimes she found herself
where spicy branches drooped
between her and the sharp-eyed

clever-tongued cousins
thought herself down to rabbit size
fuzzy silhouettes against closed eyes

sun-shot orange over gray made
soft sanctuary among the needles
buzz of bees carried her farther away

nearby Grandmother gathered summer
from her garden to keep in glass jars
down the musty basement pantry

ANGELS SING THEE

he clung seven minutes to the edge
one minute for each year of his life
or so they said the boys who urged
him farther onto the ice that day
after Christmas an unwelcome child
a bully almost sly
but we should have been kinder
said the mothers
as they hugged their own children near
and answered questions about God
heaven and what does it mean to be dead
in this season of angels
Mommy where was his Angel where
the rush of wings after the easy creaking
and then the crack that startled
to silence the boys on the bank

MEREDITH ON SWINGS

Meredith on swings
wings her body back
tilts her head and lifts her face

to leaves that overlap an open
space of late summer light
fair hair spin-slips across

her cheek and plays the air
like memory of sung grace
eyes close her toes skim
sunshadow

OUT OF DREAMS

and smoke flows morning
over a Bruegel winterscape
two raucous crows break
against the gray glass and
footprints run
rusty slush-filled stains
flecked spots where a body lay
maybe for its last gasping
under old snow cover
frayed edges
curling like sooty fingers
and behind dirty curtains
the sun a voyeur

This Border Land of Dream and Logic

¥

OUT OF DREAMS

and smoke floats morning
over rooftops this window
or a Bruegel winterscape
two raucous crows break
against the gray glass and
footprints run
rusty slush-filled stains
flecked spots where a body lay
maybe for its last gasping
under old snow cover
frayed edges
curling like sooty fingers
and behind dirty curtains
the sun a voyeur

words became too difficult
even with the children
especially with the children
so I gave my little girl piano
notes and for my wide-eyed son some
harmonies couched in a Polish lullaby

the place they brought me to
was cold, unstill with a green lawn where
we would walk the solemn children, my mystified
husband who listened only when I lost
all words who never questioned the letter I left
covered with dark blot indecipherable
shapes I had tried to keep the music at bay

carefully we walked and we were
very quiet amid the rising waters

JADWJGA FISH TALE

"You want too much," he said,
I had to keep silent
to keep the music in
my head as long as I had
the music my mouth could be a thin
line my eyes empty would reveal
nothing of the turmoil building
like seven black birds shifting
on wires startled by thunder
lifting in a crescendo of eighths and
sixteenths the splendor of broken chords
and the birds settling again their evil
eyes waiting for my fingers to make one mistake

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especially with the children
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covered with dark blots indecipherable
shapes I had tried to keep the music at bay

carefully we walked and we were
very quiet amid the rising waters

ANOTHER FISH TALE

"You want too much," he said,
so I crawled into the skin
of the Fisherman's Wife.
When I looked out at our world
through her eyes,
I only wondered he'd stayed so long.

That was before the sea boiled over
and we ate from spite the fish
who'd caused it all.

RIPPLES MAY NIGHTS

apple blossoms star-layered thick
in water ruffled a sky
by wind or stones thrown rose glass
how many rings how far eggs glazed
do they sink how deep those churchly processions
do we go in love going ches for Mary
no place with a full tank and best dresses
of gas and see s herded down the aisle by dark nuns
rippling in the rear-view mirror
the past its details blur rich scatter
examined too closely an music
nearer than ever remembered
the never lost shadow hand.
ghosts we were or plate glass
reflection wavering toward me
someone's mother becomes myself
and if time folds out the apple the worm.
in on itself all those
letters poems love invitations torn
and rippled with untenderness
carefully forgotten on purpose breeze
leave no consequences as vella.
so twenty-seven years in T-shirt and bare
later the smooth heart beats with scissors
again unripped hush the neighbor's dog
with leftover chicken strips and led by the fragrance
of the bush behind next-door's garage
gather the dark blossoms I crave.
Laura, after the gypsies, she said, stole her daddy,
would slip out at night in white
cotton gown bring me bouquets
from alley wanderings as reparation
as lovegift as promise.

MAY DAYS MAY NIGHTS

apple blossoms star-layered thick
against a painter's sky
sparkling in the grass all those glass
bright colors May mornings glazed
with more than nostalgia those churchly processions
carrying flowering branches for Mary
grade school solemnity and best dresses
little white souls herded down the aisle by dark nuns
o bring the fairest peonies spirea
bring apple blossoms which scatter
petals through the organ music
genuflect all together in honor
at Sister's clacker command.
Over grown-up shoulders
we swallow inappropriate laughter
in memory of Sister's gimlet glare —
now we know about the apple the worm.

— — — — —
smile

I close my eyes but faint on the breeze
lilacs will not let my senses settle.
I could steal forth now in T-shirt and bare
feet through the damp grass with scissors
stealthy in desire hush the neighbor's dog
with leftover chicken strips and led by the fragrance
of the bush behind next-door's garage
gather the dark blossoms I crave.
Laura, after the gypsies, she said, stole her daddy,
would slip out at night in white
cotton gown bring me bouquets
from alley wanderings as reparation
as lovegift as promise.

I'm not ready
to let go
except we agree
September
is a fine month
for beginnings

JEAN — TAKING LEAVE

(J.B. 1947-1994)

last week we
laughed over
tomato soup
by then all
you could swallow
even then you tried —
"Such a nice
shade of red
clashes if I spill
on this jaundiced skin"
today you wave
across the room
"Oh not
so good"
but you hold
my hand and smile
slow
smile
words drawn
out
after the
pause
the care you
take still
to ensure no
rush of words
unthought
or worse
unkind
Jean
why die now
I'm not ready
to let go
except we agree
September
is a fine month
for beginnings